

September 12, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

In lieu of writing a new letter to share my deep concern about the state of gifted and talented education programs in NJ, I have decided to share a plea that I wrote to the Camden City Board of Education more than a year ago. As of this recent, a case is pending with the Office of Administrative Law, in order to get the district to be held accountable for its woeful non-compliance with the state regulation concerning gifted and talented. This is not only for my child, but for all the children in Camden and other urban areas that deserve access to real and strong programming that meets the needs of the gifted and talented.

From: **Colleen Rodgers** <crodgers@teachingmatters.org>

Date: Tue, Feb 14, 2017 at 11:04 AM

Subject: Early Childhood Request for Immediate District Intervention & Resolution

To: kmccombs@camden.k12.nj.us, blowe@camden.k12.nj.us, cjones@camden.k12.nj.us, cstokes@camden.k12.nj.us, kshafer@camden.k12.nj.us, joharisykes@camden.k12.nj.us

Cc: Loray Dobson <ldobson@camden.k12.nj.us>

February 14, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Colleen Rodgers and I am writing you as a concerned parent of a gifted child. Over the past year, I have struggled to gain footing around differentiated resources and accommodations with a woefully inept and inexperienced district. My daughter entered the Early Childhood Development Center in Camden, NJ (a district school serving Pre-k and K grades) as a 3 year old, already reading independently! Everyone of course, was a bit skeptical. That's to be expected! Per the schools urging, Madison was assessed in December of 2016, using the district approved STEP Assessment. She scored at a Grade 1 combined literacy level! In response, the school appropriately began experimenting with having Madison attend literacy blocks in Grade K, a few steps away. The district bristled at the idea of such innovation. This school year 2016-2017, Madison has a phenomenal teacher, Ms. Rios, who exceeds expectation as she attempts to keep up with Madisons' interest and lightening quick mastery. On a daily basis Ms. Rios differentiates topics, stretches internet resources and tries to hold individual sessions with Madison when possible (considering of course that she has 12 other students to teach). The district has been uncooperative in supporting creative scheduling adjustments or supplementing additional resources to meet the needs of my child. Madison has long outgrown the Creative Curriculum

provided. Madison who often leads whole class group reading and debriefs, is still sitting in a classroom with 3 year olds learning how to form the letters of their name. She is a self-starter, socially/emotionally developed, a standout leader, kind-hearted and excited by learning. Weeks ago, she scored a Level 16 on the DRA literacy assessment. That is on par with a 2nd grader anywhere (not just when compared to her local peers)! Her level of mastery is not confined to literacy alone. She has also scored a 100% on the end of grade K *GO Math* assessment and excels in science and the arts. Ms. Rios has testified that “in my 12 years of teaching across the Prek -3 continuum, I have never seen anything like this. Madison is exceptionally gifted!” In accordance with N.J.A.C.6A:8-3.1, a “gifted” student refers to

“those students who demonstrate high levels of ability, in one or more content areas, when compared to their chronological peers in the local district and who require modification of their educational program if they are to achieve in accordance with their capabilities”.

Madison could in fact be the poster child of gifted and talented for the Camden City School District. However, as I pen this letter, there is NO gifted and talented program, NO identification process or programming for grade K as required by law and there definitely isn't an early intervention to transition students currently enrolled “in the grades of the district.” There is NO Gifted and Talented coordinator, and there is, to the detriment of students across the city, NO real passion for meeting students' needs across the entire continuum of “special education”.

I do understand that there is no requirement to identify pre-k students as “gifted”, however the department of early childhood has been in my daughters' classroom numerous times and gathered multiple measures of assessments. This engagement has created an expectancy of an evidence based (versus an opinion based) response.

Below is an exhaustive account of how I have attempted to navigate this hostile and unresponsive environment over the course of the past 12 months:

December 2015 Madison (3 yo) was assessed using STEP – scored 1 point shy of STEP
3 (results attached)

- School Response: pilot bridging grade K literacy support
- District Response: prohibit any pre-K student from getting modifications in Grade K
- Outcome: Madison is returned to the most restrictive environment
- School Response: After discussing success of pilot with Grade K teacher, became unresponsive to further accommodations in order to comply with restrictions

October 2016 (back at square one) parent requested a meeting with the Child Study Team to evaluate the need for a gifted IEP or 504 Plan

- Positive School Response: Provided appropriate documentation including videos and artifacts as well as a letter of teacher recommendation (letter attached).
- District Response: Child Study Team held a meeting within 30 days simply to tell me “We only deal with special education in the context of disabilities. We’re not sure who you need to speak to”

November 2016 parent wrote a letter to the district requesting direction from the *Gifted and Talented Coordinator* and further support in the way of additional in class resources

- Positive School Response: Administered DRA assessment – Madison scored Level 16 – Grade 2. Social- Developmental evaluation completed – student scored at or beyond grade level in all competencies (*results attached*)
- District Response: Sent in multiple supervisors to observe Madison without a pre-observation meeting or debrief (Ms. Susan Harper and Ms. Barbara Alley were two). One observation was done the day before Winter break while the other was conducted when the classroom teacher was absent. No direct response was sent to the parent who made the request.

January 2017 – Parents met with principal and teacher to discuss appropriate support structures (*gifted and talented coordinator* and supervisors who observed student requested to be present at this meeting – NONE showed up)

- Positive School Response – Developed an individualized schedule that provided student choice and instructional scaffolds. Sent proposed schedule to the district for approval
- District Response – Ms. Nesmith, Director of Early Childhood sent a cut and paste email response refusing to support any modifications in response to student need

Any reasonable person, with or without a full-time job, would have surely given up by now! My husband and I are both educated working professionals who have chosen to live in Camden City with full expectation that our children will receive the quality education promised in the districts mission statement.

I get the sense that everyone wants to look and touch and wonder over what a “gifted” student looks and sounds like, but no one has a clear plan of action to move the work forward! Rather than trying to operate outside the confines of minimum requirements and insignificant academic gains that has plagued the city, it is obvious that the Director of Early Childhood Department would prefer that we just let things be and stop “rocking the boat”.

As an educator, and more importantly a parent, this complacency is unacceptable for any child, let alone for children living in communities who have had enough of those

who are supposed to be in service to them, perpetuating a cycle of low expectations. From my understanding, the reason why early childhood initiatives are in place is to close the achievement gap that persists in later grades. So when a school or district has the opportunity to nurture the gifts and talents of a student who is performing beyond expectations, and chooses to do nothing, it is simply unacceptable! I cannot in good conscience sit idle and let this happen to any child, let alone my own.

Although the parents, teacher and school administration unanimously agree on the obvious need and an appropriate plan of action, it has become crystal clear to me that the Camden City District is not adequately prepared to service the special needs of my daughter. I realize that creating a strong gifted and talented program to adequately support students in the coming years, will take time and resources. I truly hope my advocacy will be the catalyst for this program to grow for Camden City students in the coming years.

As it pertains to Madison and her tenure in the Camden City District, I am asking for the following:

- 1. Immediate intervention and support for Camden City School District in appointing a qualified Gifted and Talented coordinator and providing Professional Development around research based supports particularly for K-2 gifted and talented students.**
- 2. Allocation of the full per pupil funding to pay for out of district placement for Madison in 2017-2018.**

Attached please find a comprehensive file of my communication with the district as well as school/district requested assessment results for Madison.

My sincere hope and expectation is that with your support, these outstanding issues can be resolved swiftly. In all transparency, I will continue to escalate my concern if a resolution cannot be reached. Feel free to contact me at any time at [973-494-2233](tel:973-494-2233) or via email, about next steps and the process for out of district placement.

Sincerely,
Colleen Hinds-Rodgers